Families of Character program helps parents model virtues

By Veronica Ambuul/HERALD EDITOR

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COLORADO SPRINGS. Eight years ago, Denver businessman Steve Markel took a look at his family life and didn't particularly like what he saw.

Markel, a father of five who had a successful career in the investment industry, had sent all of his children to Catholic schools, including Catholic colleges, but was disturbed that most of them had wandered away from the faith.

"I was speaking to a priest and I was kind of frustrated," Markel told Bishop Michael Sheridan during a recent episode of his radio show, "Bishop Sheridan Presents," which airs on KFEL 970 AM in Colorado Springs and KPIO 1570 in the Denver Metro area.

"I was 50 years old, I had just sold my company, and I said, 'Father, it really bothers me that four of my five children are away from the Church,'" Markel said. The priest's reply shocked him.

"He said, 'Steve, you developed their intellect; you didn't form their will,'" Markel recalled. "He said, 'Teach them virtues, Steve. You need to develop virtues in your kids."

The priest went on to explain to him that, although his children knew the Catholic faith intellectually, bad habits such as not getting out of bed on time were hindering them from living it out.

That experience served as a wake-up call for Markel and his wife and became the spark for a program to help other families avoid the same pitfalls. The program, "Families of Character," is now being distributed nationwide, Markel said.

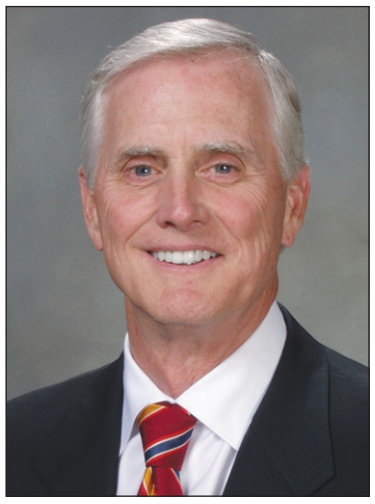
"The true definition of a virtue is a good habit done for love of God and love of others," he said. "What we really have to do is develop it. It is like showing up to work every day. I show up to work and I get better at my career because I am exercising it every day. Virtues need to be done the same way."

The Families of Character program takes participants through a 40-month process of learning about and growing in specific virtues, he said.

Although parents can complete the program on their own, group meetings are encouraged so that participants can learn from one another, he said.

Each meeting starts with a 15-minute video about a certain virtue, followed by a discussion. Then, participants complete an assessment consisting of 20-30 questions designed to help them understand how they are or are not living that virtue in their daily lives.

"From that assessment, their goal is to really take the one thing and begin to turn that vice into a virtue over the next 30 days," he said. "The first virtue is order. Let's say I do my assessment and I realize that, as a father and a husband, I am kind of leaving my things around and I really want to improve because my vice is causing my wife suffering. For the next 30 days, I am going to hang up my own coat. Well, now that little act of love now gets me out of myself, and this is why virtues are so important. We have become a selfish culture and it has magnified in our children."



MARKEL

Markel said that a critical component of the program is that parents lead by example in struggling to develop virtues.

"You can't give something you don't have," he said. "One of the things we have discovered it that I can't just abdicate my role as a parent to some school. I can't abdicate my role of faith formation to the church, I can't abdicate my role of character formation to some sports program."

Another key aspect of the "Families of Character" program is that parents start by writing a family mission statement, Markel said. The exercise of writing a mission statement helps parents agree on common goals and methods of discipline.

"That can cause major tension in a relationship, if my wife is disciplining one way and I am disciplining another," he said. "Kids are masters at separating parents. When they figure out that they can't separate you because now you have a plan, it really helps the couple in raising their children and giving them direction."

And although it's best if parents begin teaching their children virtues when they are small, Markel said that his own family is proof that it is never too late for parents to begin living and teaching virtues.

"The good news is that four of my five children were out of the church when we started because of a lack of virtues — that was eight or nine years ago," he said. "Now all of our children are married and, in that period of time, have had children. My kids are struggling — they have their challenges because they have young families. But the result of a virtuous life is joy and unity."

Markel is currently writing a book, which is due to be published in 2015. More information about the Families of Character program can be found at *www.familiesofcharacter.com.*

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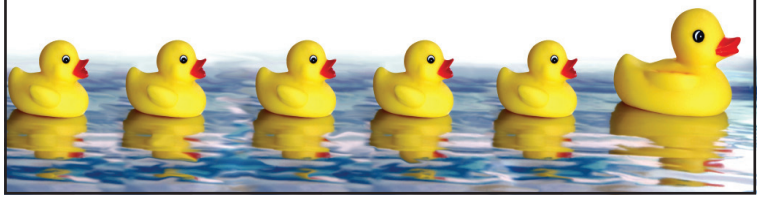
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